



ESTABLISHING *a* CREATIVE, CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE

There is in us an instinct for newness, for renewal, for a liberation of creative power. We seek to awaken in ourselves a force which really changes our lives from within. And yet the same instinct tells us that this change is a recovery of that which is deepest, most original, most personal in ourselves. To be born again is not to become somebody else, but to become ourselves.

—THOMAS MERTON

As we begin, I want to take a moment to encourage you to check in with yourself regularly during these next few weeks of journeying through this material. One of the most important things I can teach is learning to make space to listen to your own deepest longings and to begin to trust those more. There are all kinds of reasons we learn to doubt ourselves, especially when it comes to artistic expression. Part of growth is taking risks, so I encourage boldness, but I equally encourage gentleness with yourself. When you begin a creative adventure like this—which is an extension of the journey you’ve already begun—you open yourself to your vulnerability, to the dreams just beginning to bud within, to the

risk inherent in expressing your deepest self. There may be weeks where things feel more tender and you need to hold back just a little. Give yourself permission to do this.

My training in the arts is in the field of expressive arts, which engages creativity for self-expression, healing, and transformation. Through this lens, the process of art-making becomes a place of sacred discovery. When I make suggestions for the weekly creative exercises—in visual art, poetry, and movement—I encourage you to enter into the experience as a prayer, a communion with your Creative Source, and to see if you can release your worries about making a beautiful product. As an authentic expression of your longings and unique soul, what you make inevitably will have its own beauty.

There is certainly a place for the role of craft and fine art, and many of you may already be involved with the fine-art or craft world. Our focus here, however, is on the process rather than the product and on allowing the expression to come through as fully and authentically as possible. When judgments arise in the process, simply notice them with curiosity and compassion and contemplate where else in your life those voices arise. (I will address this far more extensively in the chapter on inner hospitality.) Allow the art-making process to become a container for your internal awareness, much like in meditation practice. The same is true for writing: allow yourself to express whatever is true for you in the process and, gently and with compassion for yourself, notice where the blocks, judgments, and voices arise. Give yourself permission to make mistakes, to make “bad art,” or to write something that doesn’t sound even close to perfect. This is the way we begin to cultivate inner freedom, by allowing ourselves a full range of expression as a journey of discovery.

Each time you begin an art experience, make some time to quiet yourself and connect to your breath, heartbeat, and body. Move into a receptive posture of stillness, which helps to quiet the judging mind and opens you to the gifts being offered. Each time you complete an art exploration or a prayer experience, offer thanks for this time spent with your inner monk or artist, and allow your heart to fill with gratitude for whatever wisdom has been revealed. The way of the monk and the path of the artist are teachers of slowness, of savoring, of seeing the world below surfaces.

Notice what the art materials themselves have to teach you in a given experience. Be present to the tactile qualities of collage and paint,

of writing and movement, and what each one stirs or challenges in you. Allow this awareness to be a part of paying attention to the inner process.



Honoring Beginnings

A new beginning! We must learn to live each day, each hour, yes, each minute as a new beginning, as a unique opportunity to make everything new. Imagine that we could live each moment as a moment pregnant with new life. Imagine that we could live each day as a day full of promises. Imagine that we could walk through the new year always listening to a voice saying to us: "I have a gift for you and can't wait for you to see it! Imagine!"

—HENRI J.M. NOUWEN

This journey on which you are embarking represents a new beginning—a new or deepened commitment in your own life. Take just a moment to imagine you are crossing a threshold into an unexplored room of your soul. The great Spanish Carmelite mystic St. Teresa of Avila described such a spiritual journey as a movement through concentric rooms of an interior castle until we reach the diamond at the center of our being. She says when we reach this diamond we will finally realize how truly beautiful we really are. Feel the anticipation and savor the delight at being alive and full of the hope that leads you to explore the rich tradition of monastic practice. Simply pause and breathe. Breathe in and feel the possibility in this moment. Exhale and release the distractions. Breathe in and experience the expansion in your body as a reflection of the expansion in your spirit. Exhale and surrender yourself to this moment. Now pause and reflect on what it was about this book that made your heart say yes. What were the words, the images, the ideas that touched something in you? Notice if there is a word or image right now that symbolizes what

is rising up in you, and linger with it for as long as feels satisfying. Consider recording it in a journal using color and shape.



The Inner Monastery

The true monastery was not dependent on the enclosure of walls. It was, rather, a quality of consciousness or a state of heart that involved daily commitment to maintain an inner aloneness—that place where God and soul dwell in intimacy.

—BEVERLY LANZETTA

In her book *Radical Wisdom*, Beverly Lanzetta describes medieval monasticism, and her words about the true monastery being a quality of consciousness apply equally today. Perhaps with more and more people beyond the walls of enclosure seeking the gifts of the contemplative life, cultivating this state of heart is more important than ever. She later writes that in contemporary life, such consciousness means remembering that the inner monastery is the ground from which all of our life extends—and I would emphasize that this includes creative expression:

Contemplation is always a revolutionary act. It subverts the daily tedium and searches for the kernel of meaning hidden at the center of each thing. . . . The stone enclosure that literally marked the boundaries of the medieval monastery is transposed from the concrete into a state or quality of consciousness. To be enclosed in the monastic sense is to devote oneself to God. In a modern context, this ancient purity of heart refers to the discovery of the divine as the one relationship fundamentally essential to one's life and lives out of its sources. . . . To find the monastery within is to discover the place of rest out of which all other relations flourish and grow.

The inner monastery is a quality of consciousness you bring to everything you do, including creating. It is the crucible for your transformation, and everything you need to be whole is right there within you already.

The desert monks would say, “Sit in your cell, and it will teach you everything” (Thomas Merton, *Wisdom of the Desert*). This cell is the cave of your heart, that interior place of reflection and struggle. It is the place where the spark of the divine glows and you carry that with you wherever you go. As you make art or write, the process is a container for awareness. Everything that rises up—judgments, blocks, and insights—is a reflection of the whole of your life. Your cell, the blank canvas, the white page—each of these invites you to pay attention to what is happening right in this moment. There is no need to go elsewhere to find enlightenment or transformation. The space within which you dwell and the container for your creative expression can each become the holy site of struggle and freedom. Whatever you encounter in prayer and art making is a microcosm of the macrocosm of your life:

You do not need to leave your room. . . . Remain sitting at your table and listen. Do not even listen, simply wait. Do not even wait, be quite still and solitary. The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked. It has no choice. It will roll in ecstasy at your feet. (Franz Kafka)



Silence and Solitude

Silence is never merely the cessation of words. . . . Rather it is the pause that holds together—indeed, it makes sense of—all the words, both spoken and unspoken. Silence is the glue that connects our attitudes and our actions. Silence is the fullness, not emptiness; it is not absence, but the awareness of a presence.

—JOHN CHRYSAVGIS

An essential element of committing to the monastic way is cultivating a place for silence and solitude. Like the rest at the end of a busy week that comes with Sabbath or the few moments of pause in the physical

pose of *shavasana* at the end of a yoga practice, the nourishing dimension of silence is honored and uplifted across traditions. As Chryssavgis describes, silence is the element that holds everything together. Entering into silence means to enter into an encounter with the One who ushered us from the great silence, who spoke us into being out of the wide expanse of silent presence.

Silence can be challenging. Not just because the world we live in conspires to fill each moment with noise—from radios to televisions to movies to music to urban sounds of traffic and to the congestion of people living close together—but because there is also a fear of entering into silence. When we are used to living at a distance from our deep center—caught up in the surface chatter—dropping down into the silent pool of God’s presence can evoke fearfulness. What might we discover when we pause long enough to really hear? And yet, as Thomas Merton wrote, we each have a “vocation to solitude.” This vocation means:

. . . to deliver oneself up, to hand oneself over, entrust oneself completely to the silence of a wide landscape of woods and hills, or sea, or desert; to sit still while the sun comes up over that land and fills its silences with light. To pray and work in the morning and to labour and rest in the afternoon, and to sit still again in meditation in the evening when night falls upon that land and when the silence fills itself with darkness and with stars. This is a true and special vocation. There are a few who are willing to belong completely to such silence, to let it soak into their bones, to breathe nothing but silence, to feed on silence, and to turn to the very substance of their life into a living and vigilant silence.
(Thoughts in Solitude)

Silence isn’t something we do, although we can still ourselves to receive its gifts. It is not a personal capacity, although we can cultivate practices of becoming more present. Meister Eckhart described silence as “the purest element of the soul, the soul’s most exalted place, the core, the essence of the soul.” This is the inner monastery within each of our hearts, a place of absolute stillness, our soul’s deep essence.

I echo Merton’s invitations here: let yourself belong to silence, let silence soak into your bones, nourish you, be the air you breathe. A commitment to silence is at the heart of nurturing a contemplative practice

and creative life. In silence you will discover the Great Artist from whom you emerged; you will sense the pulse of creative energy through your being so that you slowly grow to recognize that creating is your birth-right, and that you join your work with this ultimate work. But the call is nourished by the silence. We continue to return to this open space to remember who we are.



Establishing (or Deepening) a Contemplative, Creative Practice

I believe that we learn by practice. Whether it means to learn to dance by practicing dancing or to learn to live by practicing living, the principles are the same. In each, it is the performance of a dedicated precise set of acts, physical or intellectual, from which comes shape of achievement, a sense of one's being, a satisfaction of spirit. One becomes, in some area, an athlete of God. Practice means to perform, over and over again in the face of all obstacles, some act of vision, of faith, of desire. Practice is a means of inviting the perfection desired.

—MARTHA GRAHAM

What does it mean to practice the spiritual life? When we embody practices, we live into them and they shape our habits of being. We have to practice being present to the moment, because our tendency—and the world around us conspires in this—is to be distracted. The monk practices contemplation so that in her whole life she can become conscious of the sacred presence beating through the heart of the world. (While female monastics are often called nuns, in this book I use the term “monk” to include both men and women because I believe that the term is archetypal;

that is, the energy of monk exists within each one of us regardless of gender.) The artist practices creativity so that he can experience all of life as a work of art. In his *Letter to Artists*, John Paul II wrote: “Not all are called to be artists in the specific sense of the term. Yet, as Genesis has it, all men and women are entrusted with the task of crafting their own life: In a certain sense, they are to make of it a work of art, a masterpiece.”

The primary creative act is the living of our daily lives, making of it a work of art. This happens through daily attention to practice. To be a writer you must write; to be an artist you must show up to the canvas. You may already have some practices that work effectively to support you in your creative expression and contemplative presence. St. Benedict prescribes *ora et labora*—prayer and work in balance. Praying the Liturgy of the Hours and *lectio divina*, doing manual labor, and sleeping comprise the majority of a monk’s schedule. In this book we explore a variety of monastic practices to support creative living in balance.

To begin, I suggest the following three practices as ones that I have found to be essential for my own thriving as a monk and artist: walking, *lectio divina*, and reflection. I include these practices in some form each week and I invite you to consider making time for them.



Walking

Perhaps the truth depends on a walk around the lake.

—WALLACE STEVENS

Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

St. Benedict prescribed manual labor as a part of his *Rule*. In large part, manual labor is included so that the monks can earn their living, but I think there is a deeper wisdom here about the need to engage the body on the spiritual journey. Many of us earn our livings through very